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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA'S ISLAMIC COMMUNITY ELECTS MODERATE SKOPJE MUFTI, BUT RIFT CONTINUES

REF: SKOPJE 97

Classified By: POLOFF NDECOSTER, REASONS 1.4(B) & (D).

¶1. (C) Members of the Islamic Community of Macedonia (ICM) elected moderate Skopje Imam Taxhedin Bislimi as Skopje's new Mufti on February 7, ousting Salafi-backed former Mufti Zenun Berisha in an impromptu election attended by EU Monitoring Mission and OSCE representatives. The February 7 session initially was intended as a planning session for the scheduled February 14 election of the Mufti (reftel). However, Bislimi's supporters used the quorum (181 of 304 total members were present) and the presence of EU and OSCE observers to hold the impromptu election.

¶2. (C) Berisha's supporters, unprepared for the sudden move, attempted to counter it by silently boycotting the election. In the end, however, 169 of the 181 members present voted for Bislimi. The results then were endorsed by the acting President of the ICM.

¶3. (C) Berisha subsequently issued a press release calling Bislimi's election "irregular and illegitimate." Members of DUI's (ethnic Albanian coalition partner) Skopje branch in the largely ethnic Albanian neighborhood of Cair, which is comprised largely of former NLA fighters and some fundamentalists who back Berisha, were infuriated by the outcome. Conversely, ethnic Albanian opposition DPA Vice President Menduh Thaci told us that he was pleased with the outcome, since Bislimi had been backed by former ICM President Suleiman Rexhepi, who enjoys DPA support.

¶4. (C) Comment: Although Bislimi's victory may represent a gain for Islamic moderates, it is unlikely to close the rift that steadily has been developing in the ICM between the moderates and the harder-line fundamentalist camp. Equally worrisome is the role that this wildcat branch of DUI and DPA played in the election of the Mufti, after standing on the sidelines in earlier contests for Islamic religious office. To appease its hardliners, the Skopje-Cair branch of DUI now may back Berisha's rejection of the February 7 election, while DPA will continue to pose as the champion of the moderate ICM faction, backing Bislimi in order to win political support from Skopje's Muslim community in this year's parliamentary elections. If rivals DUI and DPA are pulled into the ICM's internal divisions in search of political gains, the rift between the moderates and hardliners will only grow wider. End Comment.

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